

Policy Makers Face a Trend: 'Covert' Actions Become Overt

FOREIGN INSIGHT

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WASHINGTON—The Reagan administration and Congress recently debated whether the U.S. should give overt or covert aid to Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi. The debate was public. That meant, if Mr. Reagan didn't eventually ask for overt aid, everyone would know he had opted for covert aid, essentially making it overt.

As it turned out, that process of deduction was unnecessary. Shortly after the administration secretly notified Congress that it would proceed with covert military aid to Mr. Savimbi's anti-government guerrillas, that information showed up in public print. Thus, Angola joined Nicaragua in the realm of what Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David Durenberger calls "'overt' covert action."

That raises a question: Given public nervousness about secret operations, Congress's expanded role in overseeing U.S. intelligence agencies and the seemingly inevitable leaks surrounding such matters, has covert action become an unrealistic foreign-policy option?

"My tentative conclusion is that, within any sensible meaning of the term, covert action isn't a viable policy option in the post-Watergate era," says former United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick. Richard Allen, former national security adviser to President Reagan, calls covert programs "highly problematic."

Lack of Information

Mrs. Kirkpatrick calls her conclusion tentative because she can't know for sure that there aren't any successful covert operations under way. And some experts note that there are circumstances in which covert action may work, despite the current political atmosphere.

But just about everyone agrees: The range of options that can be kept secret is much narrower today than in the pre-Vietnam era, when congressional oversight of intelligence was nominal and a broad foreign-policy consensus existed in the country. Today's oversight procedures, says Robert Turner, senior fellow at the Center for Law and National Security in Charlottesville, Va., provide a "veto by disclosure" to members of key congressional committees.

That poses a difficult challenge to any administration as it confronts the geopolitical forces that inevitably threaten global stability. The pitfalls are many.

One Washington foreign-policy expert believes, for example, that Carter adminis-

tration officials became so frustrated with waging political battles over foreign policy that they ended up concentrating too much on the narrow range of options that could be undertaken covertly.

Guerrilla Warfare

By contrast, the Reagan administration has sought to widen that range of options, and hence finds itself constantly battling Congress—overtly—over foreign-policy goals it wants to pursue covertly. The result, Sen. Durenberger complains, is "months or years of disruptive legislative guerrilla warfare."

The lesson, many experts believe, is that government officials should carefully study the criteria for successful covert action and operate vigorously within the confines of those criteria. And they should recognize the political reality that some foreign-policy goals simply will have to be defended openly in the political arena.

What are the political confines of covert action? Most experts say long-term, large-scale operations aiding movements engaged in military hostilities aren't likely to be kept secret. "The point... is that large-scale controversial covert actions will certainly become public," Sen. Durenberger said in a recent speech.

Political Prospects

Small-scale operations aimed at boosting political prospects of U.S. sympathizers within foreign countries stand a better chance of remaining clandestine. "My judgment," says a former top congressional staffer involved in foreign-affairs issues, "is that covert activities that might involve assistance to political parties or getting our viewpoints across still are policy options."

But that still precludes a wide range of options that were available to presidents in the pre-Vietnam era. Obvious examples of clandestine operations that became public are the assistance for Nicaraguan and Angolan rebels and the recently revealed Reagan plan to undermine Libyan President Muammar Qadhafi.

What about the CIA operation to foster the overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran in 1953? Highly unlikely today, most experts agree. And the widespread CIA involvement in Chile's 1964 national election, which remained secret for a decade? "Much more difficult today," says a former U.S. intelligence official.

Some experts, suggesting public opinion may be swinging back toward giving presidents greater leeway, say Mr. Reagan's highly public battles on the issue may foster that trend. "The administration has to keep going up that mountain until there's a greater sense of the necessity for covert action," says Mr. Allen.